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ABSTRACT

The British school system has relative autonomy, and therefore, could be potentially transformative--used to change existing economic and social relations. The correspondence thesis, which states that the schools perpetuate existing capitalist economic and social relations and serve as agents of reproduction, was the dominant paradigm of the last decade within the British sociology of education. This thesis has been bitterly contested, and, in recent years, substantially modified. Four developments within British social science over the last decade suggest a form of relative autonomy that grants considerable freedom to the educational system within British society to act either in a reproductive or transformative fashion. The four developments are: (1) the lack of fit between what the educational system produces and the needs of the British economic structure, (2) recent findings in social policy studies, (3) the partial penetration of capitalism in Britain, and (4) the independence of the school. The relative autonomy theory may be a helpful method by which Marxists may cope with the empirical reality of the British educational system/economy relationship. It suggests not that humans are either free or determined, but that there are both determinations and freedoms. It may be the organizing framework around which to build an empirically valid, intellectually coherent, and policy relevant British sociology of education. (RM)

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Relative Autonomy Reconstructed

Revised

by

Jim Reynolds

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Relative Autonomy Reconstructed

'The truth does not lie mid way between extremes but in both of them'. (Newman)

The early 1980's are seemingly a highly inopportune time to argue that the educational system possesses a 'relative autonomy' from the need to perpetuate existing capitalist economic and social relations. Attempts to 'tie' the educational system towards a concentration on subjects necessary for industrial production, towards a concentration on merely 'cognitive' outputs and towards a concentration on the development of high ability children is widely argued (Ahier and Flude, 1982) to have been a characteristic of educational policies under both Labour and Conservative governments since 1976. The notion that schools could potentially be sites of 'transformative' practice - a hope clearly associated with the theory that schools have the certain 'freedom' as stated in the relative autonomy thesis - is also apparently difficult to square with the increasing de-radicalisation of the curriculum, the threat posed to progressiveness in the pedagogical area and the current threats posed to potentially radical developments such as the 'new'

sixth form. All the evidence available at present seems to support the thesis that the educational system is being used to reproduce, not change, the existing set of economic and social relations.

It seems that the belief that the system has 'relative autonomy' and that it therefore could be potentially 'transformative' is only now being argued and asserted mostly because of what can only be called an 'aberration' - the popularity of neo-Marxist correspondence theories over the last decade. Given the popularity of the thesis that sees complementarity in the social relations of schools and in the requirements of the economy, it has simply taken a considerable time for any idealistic notions that grant freedom to schools to have any professional space in the discipline of sociology of education. Since - to use David Hargreaves' description - we have been both captivated by and captured by neo-Marxism, the pervasiveness of what are probably highly erroneous views about education/society correspondence unfortunately coincided with those years - the late 1960's and early 1970's - when schools were probably corresponding <u>least</u> with the needs of the economy.

From the Correspondence Thesis to the Resistance Paradigm

To outline developments briefly, correspondence theory drew from an Althusserian determinism in which capitalism reproduced itself through an R.S.A. (Repressive State Apparatus) and an I.S.A. (Ideological State Apparatus). Teachers who tried to change the system were doomed to be heroes, conventionally meeting tragic ends. Bowles and Gintis (1976) took the notion of the educational system as controlled from Althusser, added Jencksian (1971) notions that related the qualifications pupils obtained from school to their social class background, added the profoundly non-Jencksian notion that it was the discriminatory power and huge influence of the schooling system that had these effects - (Bowles and Gintis were in effect the first theorists that asserted that schools made a difference) - and dressed up the whole theoretical edifice around the notion of the complementarity of the structure and organisation of schooling and the broader requirements of the capitalist mode of industrial production.

The thesis has of course been bitterly contested. It has been argued that evidence about within school practices which are dysfunctional for capitalism has been simply ignored (O'Keefe, 1981). The thesis concentrated on examining only the structure or vessel

of the school, rather than upon any curricular content which may equally have hegemonic properties. Many school systems also, it is suggested by historical analysis (Ramirez, 1981) ante date the arrival of capitalism and societies can be found with both high levels of literacy and so called capitalistic organisational forms in feudal, pre capitalist or even agrarian societies. The specific links between capitalism and schooling appeared unproven and unclear to a large number of observers. Furthermore, the thesis was monocausal in its assertions as to the determining nature of solely economic influences upon the educational system and did not allow for other influences such as religious factors, cultural factors, gender relations or systemic factors themselves as determinants of educational form. The precise links between the economic base, the State apparatus of which education formed a part and the nature of the educational system were furthermore left completely unspecified.

The thesis had undoubted popularity however. As I have suggested elsewhere (Reynolds and Sullivan, 1980), it appeared to explain the failure of social engineering to attain more than a minimal success in affecting the outputs of the educational systemsin both Britain and America. Its emphasis upon 'reproduction' related to the 'cultural reproduction' hypotheses of the system/

society relationship propounded by both Bourdieu (1977) and Bernstein (1977), although both the latter permitted substantial and in some assessments total autonomy of the world of the cultural from the material economic base. The thesis was furthermore in tune with the structurally determinist forms of neo-Marxist thinking which had such an influence in political science, in sociology and in other disciplines such as urban studies and media studies. Even though the thesis was based primarily upon American evidence, it was taken to apply in its virtual entirety (see for example the Schooling and Capitalism reader) to the British educational system. Whilst more sensitive socialist analysis still left a place for human agency as a potential change agent of the system (e.g. Young and Whitty (1977)), both enthusiasts and critics (Musgrove, 1981) view the correspondence thesis as being the dominant paradigm of the last decade within British sociology of education.

The original somewhat simplistic and crude correspondence theories have in recent years however been substantially modified. The discovery in Willis's(1977) work of resistance, contestation and rebellion within schools has led to an appreciation that there may exist within schools a 'culture of opposition' amongst pupils who may not necessarily be leaving school with the abilities,

attitudes or moral codes supportive of the wider capitalist economy. Some pupils - as suggested by Willis - may reject mental labour and desire the manual as a symbolic gesture of their working classness. Even though such rejection of school may in the short term be functional for capitalism, since they are 'needed' to perform manual tasks, the culture of their world has in its perceptions and 'penetration' of capitalism a clearly dysfunctional, potentially transformative role, the more so if it can be developed, sharpened and linked with the insights of intellectuals and others from outside the system. Interest in the contested nature of reproduction and in the potentially transformative nature of pupil resistance is evident in the well known ethnographic work of Anyon (1979; 1980; 1981), in the more recent work of Apple (1980; 1981; 1982) and in the writings of Giroux (1980; 1982), who argues that "... what is crucial about these contradictions is that they highlight the relative autonomy characteristic of cultural institutions such as schools. It is this relative autonomy that provides the space for institutions in the ideological realm to serve as more than agents of reproduction" (1980, p. 234).

The resistance paradigm has, though, been subject to considerable criticism, most notably in A. Hargreaves (1982). Only some varieties of pupil behaviour are accorded resistance status. The quantity of resistance

by comparison with conformity is left uncharted and unstated. Whether the resistance itself is school caused or reflects merely the influence of extra-school factors (Hargreaves, 1981) is also unclear. Whether the pupils - especially women and blacks (Apple, 1980) - in whom faith is placed as agents of transformation are actually capable of such socialistic purpose also seems doubtful, particularly since they may lack a clear understanding of the nature of the world around them. Since according to some American authorities, low stream rebels resemble more of a peasantry than anything else (Garbarino and Asp, 1982), the prospects for their 'conscientisation' must be seen as limited.

Perhaps one of the more remarkable things about relative autonomy/resistance theory is, though, that it appears to have become influential in the United States, where it seems less than valid but has not been received with enthusiasm in Britain, where its tenets seem to accord much more closely with the empirical reality of a continuing lack of fit between the British education system and the needs of the British economy. American schools seem in most accounts pressed by their local communities to perform functions of skill development and talent nurturing, with a curriculum that seems to be generally supportive of capitalism.

American local State involvement - involving basic competency testing for example - has similar reproductive aims. Whilst the articulation between the American Federal Government, the States and the schools themselves is clearly different to Britain, the Federal Government's recent activities are in such areas as curriculum and pedagogy appear linked to the same attempt to encourage schools to be supportive of the economy. The increasing role of central government throughout the 1960's and 1970's in generating 'liberal' pressure on subjects like pre-school education, racial integration, the elimination of sexist practices and teacher education used policy means whereby additional sums of money were 'tied' to these specific policies and innovations - the tying of money is now much more an attempt to inculcate real knowledge about (and relevant to) the industrial world. As one authority comments (Male, 1974, p. 21) "Now the only choice left to many school boards is whether or not to participate in programs designed by the federal government or by wealthy private foundations. The lure of outside money makes the matter of participation a foregone conclusion....".

Relative autonomy theory is popular then - perhaps as a simple way of reviving rather dashed liberal hopes - in a society which even many of the theory's adherents believe to be exhibiting increasingly less of it, since

'relative autonomy may be breaking down today' (Apple, 1980, p. 16). In Britain, its adherents are few, with the exception of some tentative and exploratory formulations by Whitty (1982), myself (1979) and Dale (1982).

Relative Autonomy Theory Now

To its critics, the thesis is "incoherent" in its explanations, is clouded by a "theoretical fog" and "has not classifed the relationship between schooling and society but only added to the confusion by asserting contradictory or unclear arguments..." (all quotations from Hargreaves, 1982, p. 119). It is also alleged that in their assertions that schools are both dependent on wider social pressures and yet independent of them, those who adhere to the thesis merely rush 'to have their cake and eat it'.

Certainly, many such as Apple and Giroux wish to somehow marry together neo Marxist base/superstructure determination and the evidence of pupil resistance by asserting the independence of the pupil subcultures yet the dependency of the system on outside forces. Linked with this device is a related attempt by these authors and others to hang on to 'material determination in the last instance', which of course is the key

constituent of a specifically Marxist form of social analysis. Both Whitty (1982) and Dale (1982) seem to be in this position, particularly the latter who perceives a complex, interactive relationship between a poorly designed, rather ill equipped State apparatus and the economic base, which in the last instance is still heavily determinate.

The specificity of the political - the notion that the political sphere of civil society has an influence upon State actions separate from and perhaps in contradistinction to the economic sphere - has been of course suggested by Poulantzas (1978) and others (Bowles and Gintis, 1980), yet the possibilities of relative autonomy from the economic base that this may suggest for the State has been argued to be severely limited by other Marxists (e.g. Mouzelis, 1976). Poulantzas himself argued - perhaps appropriately from his death bed - that he too believed in economic determination 'in the last instance' and therefore in a highly circumscribed relative autonomy -

> One must know (he argued) whether one remains within a Marxist framework or not and if one does, one accepts the determinant role of the economic in the very complex sense... In this sense, if we remain in the conceptual framework, I think that the most that one can do for the specificity of politics is what I have done. I am sorry to have to speak like that. (in Block, 1980, p. 227).

In all formulations except for that of perhaps Williams (1976) - where the mode of production is no longer merely economic but also cultural - Marxist analysis leaves little room for the independence of the educational system or the State from the needs to reproduce existing economic and social relations.

Correspondence Theory Destructed

Most adherents to a relative autonomy thesis continue to argue then that the autonomy of the educational system is severely limited, constrained by the demands of an economic base which is in the last instance determinate, a view which is only different in degree from earlier Althusserian notions of complete determination of superstructure by base. The potentially transformative role of the educational system - rather than that of the pupils who reject it - is in these formulations also severely limited.

Four major developments within British social science over the last decade suggest however a rather different form of relative autonomy thesis, one that grants considerable freedom to the educational system within British society to act either in a reproductive or transformative fashion. Since these developments are only marginally appreciated within the British

sociology of education, they will be examined here in some detail.

1. The limited fit between education and the economy

The first set of evidence concerns the massive evidence of lack of fit between what the educational system produces and the needs of the British economic structure. The amount of resistance, of rejection of the mental and of searching for the manual is clearly far more than is functionally necessary for the recruitment of the numbers of workers needed to form the unskilled working class population. Large numbers of pupils still leave school with no qualification whatsoever - over 20% in Wales for example. In non-cognitive areas, the failure of adolescents to acquire the moral codes supportive of the wider structure of society are evidenced by the high rates of official delinquency (involving one child in five by age seventeen) and international studies which show British youth as much more likely to engage in antisocial conduct than those of any other industrial society surveyed. Indeed, one major cross cultural study (Bronfennbrenner, 1972, p. 286) concluded that

> It is noteworthy that of all the countries in which my colleagues and I are working ... the only one which exceeds the United States in the willingness of children to engage in anti social behaviour is the nation most close to us in our Anglo-Saxon traditions of individualism. That country is England.

Whilst there may well be family factors and wider social class influences responsible for school failure in both the cognitive and affective areas, much evidence suggests that it is the workings of the educational system itself that is responsible for much pupil alienation. The existence of certain rules, the ethos of schools, their curricula and their pupil/teacher relations have all been suggested as school factors that are implicated (Reynolds, 1975; 1976). It is simply very difficult to see how capitalism is in any way served by an educational system that generates these outputs.

Secondly, there is evidence suggesting the very limited extent to which the organisation of schools 'corresponds' with capitalism's needs. By contrast to American high schools where classroom life is heavily individualised through use of graded tests and materials that are different from child to child and with a guidance system designed to facilitate individual differentiation, British schools still appear as more

'collectivist' in orientation, since learning is still heavily group or class based. Although there are hints that this may be changing in some comprehensive schools (D. Hargreaves,1982), the predominance of streaming or banding as against setting and the absence of much use of individually determined work programmes suggest the continuing existence of a collectivist ethos, instead of an ethos preparing for the individualised worker/plant relationships that capitalism is said to 'need'.

Thirdly, the limited correspondence between school organisational form and the requirements of capitalism extends to curricular content also. The survival in schools of a liberal, humanities based curriculum, the emphasis upon the acquisition of knowledge for the purposes of intellectual self betterment rather than collective material gain, the limited swing to science within higher education, the continuing high status of 'pure' disciplines as against work related applied knowledge, the decline in commercially important foreign language courses at sixth form level and the continuing presence in schools of a 'cultural' world of sexist practices that effectively isolates many able girls from doing industrially relevant courses in science and technology all suggest lack of correspondence.

This lack of fit between the outputs of the educational system and the 'needs' of the economy is probably due to a structural looseness in the wider relationships between aspects of the State and the economy. Britain has a heavily decentralised locus of power in the educational system that is rare in a European context, where central government intervenes more in the areas of both pedagogy and curricular content. There has also been - until its emergence quite recently - no comparable citizen or community involvement (as in the United States) that would act as a populist check upon non reproductive functioning and system outputs.

The system then - probably more than any other in the industrialised world - is autonomous. The tradition of headteacher autonomy in decision making, the absence of any centrally imposed core curriculum, the inadequate procedures for monitoring, evaluation and feedback of information upon inputs, processes and outputs, the substantial autonomy of L.E.A.'s again confirmed by the 1977 Tameside decision and the huge variability between schools that are outwardly subject to the same pressures and outwardly aiming at attainment of the same goals all suggest a highly autonomous educational system, with substantial variation in practice within it.

Although it could be that this autonomy merely exists because the system can be relied upon to reproduce capitalism without any need for direct State involvement, the exercise of that autonomy has often been by people who do not wish merely to reproduce existing class relations. The large number of radicals who have been attracted into teaching, the presence amongst many of a liberal, educational orientation rather than a training orientation, the attraction of teaching to those with high autonomy needs and the ways in which schools are a refuge for those with high security needs (Derr and De Long, 1982) do not suggest an overwhelming orientation amongst those in education to generate in their schools crucibles in which industrially relevant skills and characteristics are forged. There is I suspect as much or more evidence that the system is staffed by those with an anti industrial bias as there is evidence of pro industrial bias.

Apart from being used sometimes to stand <u>against</u> the demands of the wider society, the autonomy of the system has been used in an attempt to satisfy educational practitioners own class or status interests in ways again, that are not necessarily functional for the wider capitalist enterprise. The influence of the National Union of Teachers in, for example, limiting the areas of school outputs to be assessed by the Assessment of

Performance Unit, in changing the provisions for the publication of school examination results in the 1980 Education Act and in opposing any professional disciplinary body for teachers, as examples, suggest the important influence of educators in moulding the system to suit their own definitions of the situation, definitions which may not be functionally in accord with the economic interests of capitalism.

2. Recent developments in social science/social policy studies

It is important to realise that many of these influences have passed by the British sociology of education because of its long standing tradition of an intellectual location within broader sociological paradigms to the exclusion of developments in other related fields, a tradition unknown in the United States for example where policy sciences, the educational management tradition and mainstream sociology of education are both inter linked and inter penetrated. We have missed then developments in political science and particularly in social policy field (Hall et al., 1975) associated with the 'bounded pluralism' thesis, which in summary holds that the economic base imposes major constraints upon State actions but that there is a degree of freedom within these constraints to respond

to demands from other spheres of influence such as the political, the cultural or the religious for example.

Within the field of social policy again, we have missed developments that see the State and its managers as capable of acting as historical subjects, generating policies beneficial to themselves, as in analysis of the medical profession (Parry and Parry, 1976), the growth of the Manpower Services Commission (Blunckett, 1983) or social work practice (Hall, 1976).

Further developments in thinking about how within State decision making takes place (Hall, op. cit.; Crossman, 1970) shows the processes as 'muddling through', as the politics of administrative convenience, as potentially disjunctive incrementalism and as supportive of the 'cock up' theory of history, which argues the State to be fragmented,uncoordinated and precedent bound in its actions, totally attached to pattern maintenance, coping and mere survival as its major goals.

Finally, historical scholarship (e.g. Simon, 1975) suggests that the State itself may be the outcome of struggle whereby the working class may evoke - because of the independence of the rights granted in individuals by the political 'site' - concessions which range beyond what is strictly economically necessary for the requirements of efficient production.

3. The partial penetration of capitalism in Britain

The extent to which the 'cultural' world of values and the functioning of key British institutions may in fact be 'capitalist' in orientation has also been the subject of recent somewhat controversial analysis (Wiener, 1982). The public schools of the nineteenth century, for example, actually aimed to 'civilise' children from the new commercial and industrial middle classes away from holding 'capitalist' values about the importance of science, technology, business and commerce - many authorities would argue (Jackson and Marsden, 1962) that the imitation of the private education system by the State schools generated in grammar schools for example very similar organisational values. Gentleman, it seemed and perhaps still seems, should not try too hard and within schools and also outside

> the dominant collective self image in English culture became less and less that of the worlds' workshop. (...) These standards and images supported a very attractive way of life, geared to maintenance of a status quo rather than innovation, comfort rather than attainment, the civilised enjoyment of , rather than the creation, of wealth (Wiener, 1982, pp. 158-159)

Given the strong anti-industrial, somewhat Luddite and pre-industrial rural echoes that are found even in the British Labour party, the strong suggestion must

be of a lack of penetration of capitalist economic values in British culture, key British institutions such as schools and within the political 'site'.

4. The independence of the school

Perhaps the last major set of empirical evidence which suggests a degree of autonomy for the educational system is the growing body of knowledge that focusses upon the individual school's substantial freedom to determine the nature of its educational output. Our own past work into the functioning of secondary modern schools shows huge variation in the means employed to deliver the attainment of common goals, means which had implications for the characteristics of their outputs of pupils. Comprehensive schools also seem to have had clearly specified goals but an absence of clearly specified organisational means to attain them and the precise ways in which they have attempted to meet the demands to generate more talent, involving a concentration upon the higher streams combined with an increased coercion of the former secondary modern school pupils, seems to have generated outputs of pupils more developed cognitively but in many ways more unsocialised into mainstream core values. Schools in our work we have seen as determining the nature of the wider society as well as being determined by it, in an interactive relationship

with the economic and political 'sites' of the wider society (see Reynolds and Sullivan, 1982).

Relative Autonomy Theory Reconstructed

To summarise so far, we have seen that existing body of relative autonomy theory has grown out of a dissatisfaction with the complementarity of the education system and the economy proposed by adherents to the correspondence thesis. Whilst as a theory it is seemingly more popular in America than in Britain, American society seems to at present evidence more correspondence than autonomy. Recent formulations of the theory propose only severely limited autonomy, together with a continuing economic determination in the last instance.

Using British evidence, it is suggested that evidence for a 'stronger' relative autonomy theory exists, evidence that makes it difficult to propose any determinate relationship between capitalism's economic base and the nature of the educational systems functioning or the nature of its outputs of pupils. There is a lack of 'fit' in the organisation of schools, the content of the curriculum and in the ways that educators have tailored the system to meet their own perceived needs. The system has substantial autonomy, is part of a State apparatus poorly coordinated to serve capitalism and may reflect in part the results

of struggle by working people for transformation of their lives by means of education. Capitalism itself may not have penetrated either British culture of key British institutions to the extent hitherto assumed. Schools appear to be active participants not merely in the reproduction of existing sets of productive relationships but in actually re-making - utilising their freedom as means - the forces that influence them in a complex, interactive relationship between 'superstructure' and 'base'.

Our evidence about the interrelationships between the British educational system and the British economic base would suggest a theoretical position as follows:-

1. There exist important but not completely determinate economic constraints upon the educational system that prescribe certain types of pedagogy and practice as functional, given the requirements of the capitalist economic base to further capital accumulation. These constraints can be seen as broad limits outside of which practice is unlikely to extend.

2. A range of other non-material influences - religious factors, historical tradition and gender relations for example - also have influence upon the precise nature of the educational system, the practices employed within schools and the nature of the outputs which the system generates. These influences determine

exactly where educational practice becomes located between the constraints of the economic sphere.

3. The high degree of autonomy granted to the system grants it power to be reproductive or transformative in its effects upon the economic base. Certain practices - training for technology for example - may be reproductive; others - such as a radical social studies curricula - may be transformative, the precise mix of practice depending upon the strength and range of non economic influences and the precise nature of the practice desired by those educators who staff the system.

4. The precise mix of policies adopted will have effects upon the constraints of the economic base and upon the nature of the economic and other influences in a complex system of 'interactive feedback' between system, economic base and other 'sites'.. The economic base is therefore crucially seen as changeable by the way in which the system chooses to utilise its autonomy and is in no sense merely determinate but also determined.

There may well be those from existing theoretical positions who do not regard such versions of relative autonomy theory as outlined here as in accord with empirical reality or who do not view the theory as in any way a 'progressive problemshift'. This formulation does accept a large degree of economic determination

of the system as given, which may not be generally acceptable to Weberians for example. It accepts that the primary role of the system is a reproduction of existing sets of economic and social relations. It does not accept economic determination in the last instance, which may make it unacceptable to neo-Marxist, seeing the base as in part open to determination as well as determining. It does not attempt to argue that all phenomena - cultural, sexual, political and social - are merely epiphenomena of the economic and grants these variables partial independence. It does accept feedback from superstructure to base and it does accept a 'looseness to fit' between educational system and economic structure. In all these respects, it will be open to attack from those who inhabit existing entrenched theoretical positions.

There is no doubt also that this multi causal theory, unlike monocausal vulgar Marxism, requires a precise determination of the range of influences upon the system and their precise relative strengths as determinants of practice. The extent of material influences - as opposed to non-material - needs to be validated and assessed. The extent of the systemic autonomy also needs careful investigation, as does the nature of the systems of feedback from educational system to economic base. This is of course a major

intellectual task and there is no reason to expect that it will be one on which many people in the discipline will ever become engaged. In spite of the evident fact that relative autonomy theory has utility, that it explains disparate findings and that it begins to explain the somewhat complicated, confused and complex nature of British late capitalism, there are likely to be numerous blocks upon its future development as a useful middle range theory. Most important of these is our continuing disciplinary tendency for the macro end of the discipline to be peopled by structural determinists and the micro end by ethnographers who - implicitly if not explicitly - see human behaviour at classroom level as unconstrained. Very few people - save only the contexted interactionists or structured interactionists - occupy a 'both/and' position on human development that is similar to the 'both free/and constrained' nature that is the relative autonomy position.

Crucially, there are such a small number of people operating and researching at the level of the educational system or at the level of the individual school itself that very few sociologists of education can ever see directly the sort of data which leads in my view inexorably towards a relative autonomy position. If one sees schools all beset with similar policies to

reproduce the existing pattern of class relations and with similar intakes ultimately generating very different processes and outputs or if one sees L.E.A.'s responding differently and using their autonomy to utilise different sets of means to attain stated Governmental or State goals - if one sees those things happen, one can have no position other than that of relative autonomy. Until more people return to study the school and the educational system, rather than focussing on the macrostructural or micro-interactional levels few will have the potential of seeing both freedom and constraint in operation, as educators utilise different strategies, coping mechanisms and procedures to mediate the common extra-school factors of economic, political and social life into that classroom and school experience that in turn affects the nature of the schools' output.

The relative autonomy theory - if it can be developed and particularly if the notion of the school as both determined and free can be utilised by more researchers - has immense promise. It is an organising framework to link together apparently disparate phenomena. In our situation of continuing paradigmatic confusion, there is something for both micro and macro ends of the spectrum in its thesis. At a basic level, it does actually make possible a sociology of education,

whereas determinist Marxism reduces our discipline to being merely the educational implications of economic or political structure, an epiphenomena of economics or politics. It also makes links between the old sociology of education - most of whom were closet relative autonomists - and those who have forged the developments of the last decade.

Crucially, it makes possible a link between sociology of education and the educational system's practice, a link that has been defined out of existence by determinist Marxism's emphasis upon the determination of the educational by the economic and by that form of resistance theory which saw only pupil potential independence.. At a time when the system itself is lost, uncertain of direction and badly in need of fresh intellectual input after the collapse of those policies associated with the liberal or Fabian dream, it seems more desirable than ever that this intellectual reorientation takes place for the sake of those who staff the system. For the discipline's sake too an involvement in the day to day problems of 'policy' has advantages - it moves us away from the somewhat endless relativistic philosophical problems with which the sociology of knowledge has disabled us ever since Michael Young shattered the discipline's old paradigms and moves us towards a concentration upon the practical and towards a concentration

upon what is practicable. Every social scientific or scientific discipline that has made progress in its infancy has done so through a close alliance with practical problem solving, as physiology did in the last century through its close allegiance with clinical medicine, simply because such an allegiance with the practical prevents quasi philosophical or metaphysical speculation of a kind that generates no certainties. A concentration upon questions that can be answered seems preferable to an obsession with those that by their nature cannot generate answers.

Our reorientation towards the concern with the more practical matters of educational policy that the relative autonomy theory makes possible is also clearly linked with the ongoing search for transformative practice, a search which has again preoccupied the American sociology of education but which has been curiously neglected at a practical level within Britain. The socialist philosophical position that 'socialistic' transformative practice should be encouraged and fought for is clearly not one that is shared by all members of the discipline, many of whom would regard political commitment of this kind as intellectually undesirable in its effects upon scholarship.

Yet ultimately the way to understand something as complex as a school is probably to attempt to change it, since the change attempts as they encounter blocks, facilitators or linkages between various process

factors will reveal the complexity of the institution. Whilst one should be cautious about commitment to a transformative practice of only one (socialistic) variety, the close involvement in action that this would give the discipline is again something that is likely to advance rather than retard our knowledge of schools.

Conclusion - Whither Neo-Marxism?

In this paper, an attempt has been made to suggest that relative autonomy theory has utility or usefulness. It attempts - as formulated here - to explain how the educational system is both constrained and free in its actions. The system is seen as facing external constraints but as having freedom - through its variety of coping strategies and internal processes - to determine the precise ways in which it will react. The site of the school - where structure is mediated through to the individual child and where the individual child influences that structure in turn - is argued to be an important location for sociological work, together with a renewed emphasis upon practical educational matters permitted by relative autonomy theory and encouraged by a search for transformative practice.

Perhaps the most important group for whom relative autonomy theory has utility is, however, neo-Marxists themselves. Whilst it would be erroneous to assume that a highly heterogeneous group within the discipline had completely common beliefs and tenets, the Marxist 'enterprise' as Musgrove labelled it does seem open to a number of highly damaging criticisms.

Neo-Marxism's monocausal economic determinism, monolithic view of the State, correspondence view of the educational system/society relationship and assertion of limited superstructural freedom fly in the face of much empirical scholarship and have intellectually greatly harmed Marxism, since disconfirmatory evidence has usually either been ignored or, if noticed, dismissed. The theoretical position of neo-Marxism seems increasingly to owe more to a commitment to a certain theoretical view of what empirical reality ought to be, rather than to a sensitively grounded appreciation of what empirical reality actually is.

For a body of theory that is increasingly intellectually discredited, relative autonomy theory is not only useful in permitting a theoretical reorientation - one suspects that it is also far closer to classical Marxism in its tenets. The economic determinism of neo-Marxism - with which relative autonomy theory is clearly at intellectual odds - is not in tune with

classical Marxism, for whilst Marx saw 'the mode of production' as the foundation of human society since economic activity is essential and indispensable, nowhere does Marx argue that independent of time and culture the mode of production is 'universally decisive' in determining the various froms of society. As Zeitlin (1981, p. 15) notes "It is strictly a matter for empirical investigation whether economics, politics, religion or whatever will be the decisive element for change or non change in any particular case". Classical Marxism - like relative autonomy theory - saw the economic structure as changeable over time, particularly of course by means of an educational inculcation that related to the empirical reality of society. In its notions of the society being determined yet changeable, relative autonomy theory seems to this author at least to be reflecting the historical tenets of Marxist scholarship.

One suspects, then, that relative autonomy theory may be a helpful method by which Marxists may cope with the empirical reality of the British educational system/economy relationship. It suggests not that humans are <u>either</u> free <u>or</u> determined but that there are both determinations and freedoms. It sees humans

as influenced and influencing. It may just be the organising framework around which to build an empirically valid, intellectually coherent and policy relevant British sociology of education.

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